

The Downside to the Runoff in Afghanistan

Lincoln A. Mitchell

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It looks as if President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan has been convinced of the need for a runoff election against Abdullah Abdullah, scheduled for November 7th. Pressure for the runoff grew after the extent of election fraud in the election of August 20th became clear in the weeks following that election. Many observers believed that Karzai did not legitimately get the 50% of the vote necessary to win in the first round.

The runoff, on the surface, seems like a good idea because it will give Karzai's government another chance to run the election fairly and confer greater legitimacy on the eventual winner, who presumably, at least according to the [U.S. Secretary of State](#) will be Hamid Karzai. The argument for the runoff is that if Karzai is perceived as being elected fairly in this second round, as opposed to under a strong shadow of doubt in the first round, it will make him more able to govern effectively and strengthen Afghanistan's democratic credentials.

This argument, however, only makes sense if we are willing to completely ignore the first round where Karzai, and his team, demonstrated beyond a doubt that they were not democrats. Winning a runoff cannot erase what happened in the first round. Therefore, winning election in the runoff may make Karzai seem more legitimate, but it will not make him more of a democrat.

There is also, however, a genuine downside to having a runoff in Afghanistan, particularly if Karzai ends up winning it. For Karzai, winning the runoff will also ensure that there will be no consequences for a government, and a president, who committed large scale election fraud. The message the west will be sending is that it is not really so wrong to stuff ballot boxes, inflate turnout and vote totals, intimidate voters and otherwise commit election fraud, as long as the party doing this was going to win anyway. This undermines any pretense of interest in democracy on the part of the U.S. and those pushing for a runoff.

There are admittedly very few good options here. Ignoring the fraud and recognizing Karzai as the winner would be an even worse course to follow. Asking Karzai to step down because the election fraud he committed, or allowed to be committed in his name, makes him unfit to lead Afghanistan would send a clear message, but could undermine Afghan stability even more. Nonetheless, it is imperative that following this election, assuming Karzai wins, the U.S. should understand clearly that the newly elected Afghan president is no democrat and has no ability or intention to steer his country in that direction.

It might also be wise to consider the precedent this sets. Being called upon to have a runoff, while humbling, is not the kind of consequence that will dissuade other presidents

from committing election fraud. Moreover, if, in the future, the U.S. calls for a president to step down because he has committed widespread election fraud, that president can simply respond that perhaps a runoff, like the U.S. demanded in Afghanistan, is a better idea.